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ABSTRACT

This discussion of inclusive education notes current controversies and proposes that inclusion, as it is currently conceived, has too narrow a focus and should be extended to cover, not just students with disabilities, but all children because all children have unique needs. After an introductory section, the paper identifies such problems with implementing inclusion as distortion of models and inclusion's origins in the field of special education. Basic principles that underlie a culture of inclusion and a definition of learning are offered in a discussion of characteristics of a transforming school. Examples of truly inclusive school practices are offered, such as a changed relationship between student and teacher, alternative groupings of students, and cooperation between school and community. Finally, inclusion is seen as a hope for the future in its valuing of diversity. (DB)

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# Building Inclusive Schools: Places Where All Children Can Learn

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# Building Inclusive Schools: Places Where All Children Can Learn

Sharon F. Rallis
Gretchen Anderson

Occasional Paper Series: Volume IX, Number 2

Reprinted from "Inclusion: Buzzword or Hope for the Future?" 1994 monograph of the New York State Council of Educational Associations

**The Regional Laboratory**
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## About the Authors

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Inclusion could be a concept that fundamentally transforms the way we approach education or it could be just another in a long line of bankrupt buzzwords. Inclusion is a hot topic right now, and the drive to implement it is both pervasive, strong, and frenetic. Legislators pass new laws; federal and state agencies mandate new policies; schools adopt new programs; parents make new demands. Action and reaction abound, but the actors and the activities lack a common visior of the concept and the goal. At its best, inclusion means "rethink the entire structure of schooling and the path between teaching and learning in order to promote equity"; but at its worst, inclusion can become "cut all special education and dump every kid on unprepared classroom teachers." When a term can mean such different things, it really means nothing. It cannot be the basis for sustained reform. The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands believes that both the concept and the implementation of inclusion require deep rethinking, or all this activity, while in pursuit of a laudable goal, will not improve our schools and may, in fact, do more damage than good.

Even if everyone shared a common vision and implementation were consistently good, we believe that inclusion, as it is currently conceived, has too narrow a focus. The action is happening in a limited arena. Inclusion is a concept that can produce truly equitable education, but the missing piece is the understanding that equity means much more than simply improving services for the child with disabilities. The debates over whether inclusion is just a new term for mainstreaming or an excuse for cutting all special education fail to recognize that schools must serve all children. Currently they do not. Inclusion should be a guiding philosophy that embraces all children, not just those with handicaps. An inclusive school is one where all children belong — the athletic girl, the gifted boy, the class

clown, the recent immigrant who knows no English, the quiet one, and the "normal" middle-of-the-road student. The school is a place where all can learn.

This perspective draws on the beliefs and experiences of educators in the schools with whom we work. Together, we recognize the value of children, diversity, and learning. We believe that learning is natural, that diversity is a resource, that each child can contribute to an emerging society, and that the purpose of schooling is to enable each child to reach her or his full potential. This perspective, while thoroughly modern, is not a new one. It has routes in ancient Greek philosophy, and hundreds of years ago, Rousseau wrote:

> Each individual is born with a distinctive temperament. . . . We indiscriminately employ children of different bents on the same exercises; their education destroys the special bent and leaves a dull uniformity. Therefore after we have wasted our efforts in stunting the true gifts of nature we see the short-lived and illusory brilliance we have substituted die away, while the natural abilities we have crushed do revive (Dewey, p. 116).

It is easy enough to say, and even to believe, that we cherish children and value diversity. But living up to these words would require a radical shift in practice because most of today's schools still train and sort children to fit existing slots in a static workforce, because today's schools are not designed to make all children — those with handicaps or from minority groups or the supposedly "normal" — feel welcome, comfortable, and included. Fundamental philosophical change is not easily accepted and radical restructuring is not cheap; both a profound commitment and a reallocation of resources are needed. But we believe it is absolutely necessary to make these changes. We present this paper to suggest a vision for and implications of building a truly inclusive school.

## Inclusion: An Educational Decision?

Above we note two problems with the current thinking and implementation of inclusion as a strategy for school reform. The first is a common problem: when any model of change is disseminated and adopted across a wide area, it loses some of its conceptual integrity and may become quite distorted. The second is specific to inclusion as a strategy: people continue to look at inclusion as an issue that applies only to those children who are identified as disabled or

handicapped. This limited view is a result of its history. Expanding the arena of action, or not, is the difference between transforming education or not.

Historically, the concept of inclusion emerged in the field of special education. For years, the dominant model of special education delivery was mainstreaming. Contrary to its name, this model effectively meant taking children out of regular classrooms and taking them to the services. Children with disabilities were frequently pulled out of regular classes to help them "keep up" with regular students, while others spent long hours on buses to get to the appropriate services. Children with handicaps were clearly identified and labeled as different and needy. When people started questioning the equity and the efficacy of this model, inclusion emerged as an alternative. Its premise was that many disabled children could benefit from remaining in a regular classroom most of the time, with the services coming to them. Inclusion was an educational decision, with a clear goal of improving outcomes for a limited number of identified students.

As the concept has played out in practice, however, the clarity of purpose has been lost and the values underlying inclusion have become muddled. Some proponents advocate inclusion because it improves the socialization of children with handicaps, others because it promises to reduce segregation in the classroom, still others because it potentially reduces the cost of expensive special services. Social, political, and economic forces have come to the forefront. Inclusion is no longer a simple educational decision.

These different goals, and their accompanying values, can lead to dramatically different practices in the name of inclusion. State legislatures, federal policies, and local lawsuits are all thrusting "inclusion" on the schools. The implications for funding, curriculum, and instruction — indeed for the entire school — are significant, but the decisions are being made by politicians, lawyers, and judges, rather than educators and parents. Many parents of "normal" children fear that these "different" children will command a disproportionate share of the classroom resources. Many parents of children with disabilities fear that their children will not get the same level of attention and service that they received in special classes. Many teachers feel entirely unprepared to deal with this new challenge. Certainly there have been some great successes, but there have been enough problems to prompt the American Federation of Teachers to call for

a moratorium on full inclusion initiatives until we can answer questions like "who gets included, how, and when," "what do you do with violent students," and "how should teachers be prepared for this new assignment" (Sklaroff).

To some extent, this situation is no different from that facing any major reform effort, such as school-based management or cooperative learning. The complexity of inclusion, and the lack of clarity about its value, adds to the mystery of modern schooling, increasing the gap in understanding between communities and schools and hindering the development of community support for reform. Halfhearted or incomplete implementation risks increasing teachers' cynicism, as yet another grand idea comes and goes and nothing really changes. Poor implementation can undermine community support as well, when just a single horror story about a difficult class or student can get around town in no time at all. Losing either teachers' support or community support can be devastating for a school or a district that wants to engage in real reform.

But beyond the common trials and tribulations of reform, The Regional Laboratory sees a deeper problem with this treatment of inclusion. Conceptually, "inclusion" remains focussed on the disability not on the child. The child is an abstraction, representing a category — the handicapped — rather than an individual. There are only two kinds of children in this discussion, the "normal" and the "disabled." The implicit definition of inclusion in this discussion is "mixing the aberrant with the normal." We believe that this narrow definition of inclusion will not work. It simply ignores the fact that today's classrooms are representative of society and contain a cornucopia of differences. Those children who appear to be "normal" have varying abilities. They bring a complex assortment of experiences, cultures, languages, and resources, and many of them feel just as excluded as any child with a physical or mental handicap. Any discussion and action about inclusion must recognize and include all the differences in all children.

To broaden the definition of inclusion might seem to overwhelm. We suggest, however, that this extension is the first step to identifying a set of beliefs about schooling that can shape the choices a school or community makes (Astuto and Clark). These choices provide the enabling conditions that will make inclusion work. When the differences in individual children are accepted and celebrated, the culture of the school will change.

## Building a Culture of Inclusion

The Regional Laboratory's definition draws from a larger philosophy that values and recognizes the uniqueness and potential of each individual as an active, contributing member of a democratic society. We believe that all people can learn. In our view, the school does not ask if a student can learn, or how much of a predefined body of knowledge a student has absorbed, but under what conditions will a student learn and what opportunities for learning have been offered. The practice of schools is focused on the construction and use of knowledge by the students themselves. The success of schools is judged on the experiences provided for the learner, on the meanings the learners create out of the experiences, and on the ability of the learners to communicate and act on what they have learned. This means, by definition, that children from poor families, children who speak no English, children in trouble with the law, and children with handicaps — all children — can and do make sense of their worlds; and they all need rich school environments and multiple opportunities to share the constructs they have built about their worlds.

We believe the school is responsible for providing multiple, complex experiences and an environment conducive to making sense of these experiences. This environment, we believe, will reflect the following principles:

- Human beings are born as learners; thus, all people can learn.
- Learning is a social process that takes place through interactions among learners.
- Interacting with others of different styles and perspectives enhances learning.
- Learning and self esteem are enhanced when the learners appreciate each other's unique talents and accept each other as individuals (Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education).

Learners need not only to act but also to know the meaning of their actions, not only to think but to understand the impact of their thinking. They need to develop the skills and construct the knowl-

edge that will enable them to function successfully in the world. A school environment that meets these conditions will help in that process.

This "progressive" conceptualization of schooling is more than a current fad or political ideology; it has roots in the research and philosophy of scholars such as Piaget and Dewey and is consistent with recent research on brain development and cognitive psychology. It is well established that multiple, complex, concrete experiences are essential components of learning and teaching and that the overwhelming need of learners is meaningfulness (Caine & Caine). Thus, creating a rich, interactive, and complex environment filled with a mix of children with a range of backgrounds and abilities is more than just a boon for the disadvantaged or the handicapped; it is essential for all learners.

Schools that are following this model and transforming themselves into places where all children can learn are moving beyond the rhetoric to seek answers to the following questions:

- What do we mean by learning?
- What do we mean by all children?
- How can all children belong in our school?
- How can all children experience success in our school?

In inclusive schools, the answer to the first question is that learning is a process of inquiry. Like Rousseau, we believe that all children have innate abilities; it is the role of the school and the teacher to discover and nurture these abilities. Educators facilitate and encourage children to construct meaning out of experience and to test the validity of their constructions, rather than confine, shape, or channel these constructs. A child with a physical or mental handicap does not fit into a predetermined slot any more than does an African-American child or a Spanish-speaking child. Because the potential is unknown, expectations are high and no limits are set. Each child makes a unique contribution to society; the child is emergent and the society to which the child contributes is emergent.

This definition of learning leads naturally to the answer to the second question. When we say "all" children we mean each individual child. A school and its community must value each child, not his or her status, appearance, or seeming ability. Childhood must be valued in and of itself, as a time when each child can explore the

world, construct meaning, and discover possibilities. If the individual child's inquiry and learning are valued, we must believe that new potentials will be reached and new workforces will be created. The future is valued, not as a perpetuation of today, but as a promise to be constructed by today's children. All children belong because they are part of that construction.

A school that promotes and validates the contribution of each child to the present and the future is building an inclusive culture. Creating belonging goes beyond simply finding a place for the "aberrant" child. Author and psychologist Norman Kunc notes that presently very few people — children or adults — feel like they belong in schools (*The Regional Lab Reports on Inclusive Education*). A transforming school recognizes this and reexamines learning, teaching and assessing in this light. The school reconsiders how children and adults learn, what they must learn, and how to measure this learning.

Successful learning in this context is defined as creating a product of inquiry — a piece of writing or art, a solution to a problem or puzzle, a new definition for a phenomenon — and then sharing constructs with others so that they too can understand and shared constructs can be developed. This is the kind of learning that goes on for an entire lifetime. Success is not defined as fitting a specific mold or achieving a minimum score on a standardized test.

This flexibility, however, does not mean that anything goes. Schools working with The Regional Laboratory demand that their students gain

- skills for learning and communicating, including reading, writing, computing, listening, speaking, technological and scientific literacy, critical thinking, and problem solving;
- essential knowledge that will help them understand and operate in a multiracial, multicultural, interdependent world;
- a sense of efficacy and personal and social responsibility.

As in life, success in school means having the ability to thrive in and to contribute to the growth and development of a diverse, constantly changing world.

## How Can All Children Learn . . . Together?

If we expect to create learning environments to include all children, we must re-think the way the school is designed and structured. Including all children does not mean that we simply reassign all children to traditional classrooms. If, instead, we look at how children learn and we ask what is needed to create settings that provide what children need to learn, we can make some decisions about how to structure and equip these settings. The transforming schools with which The Regional Laboratory is working in the Designing Schools for Enhanced Learning (DSEL) Initiative ask

> Who are the children in our school?
> How are they learning?
> What do they need to learn?
> How can we provide these necessities?

In answering these questions, DSEL schools are not bound by traditional groupings and expectations. They discover that children learn through interaction and experimentation. They know that the mind needs multiple, complex, concrete experiences to detect patterns and make approximations. They see the value for long-term learning by immersing the child in the experience. Recognizing that one effective stimulus for learning is the introduction in a comfortable context of an unknown concept or skill (Vygotsky), they create a context for learning in which children use one another and adults to come to know what they did not know before. Thus, DSEL schools do not resort to simple age and ability categories when they describe their students. They use heterogeneous groupings. Many have multiage learning settings because these better reflect who the students are and how they learn.

The relationship between the student and the teacher is changing to one where both are exploring and learning together. Students and teachers together identify questions for study. Together they explore resources. They read, they observe, they experiment, they interview. They share their discoveries and discuss possible answers, interpretations, explanations. They create concepts, theories, and hypotheses and test them on each other. One fourth grade class we observed recently was exploring the planets. Their questions ranged from the basic "What are the planets made of?" to the philosophic "Is there life on other planets?" All were complex questions in their own way, spanning a wide range of subjects. After identifying questions, the

group generated a list of possible resources they might use to find information on these questions. Again the list ranged from encyclopedias to experiments to science fiction. The teacher's role was to guide and to encourage, not to offer answers. The children identified and found the resources they needed, and this process was as important to their learning as the content they eventually found.

The creation of such a learning community is a daunting task. It requires radical rethinking of the roles of students and teachers and of the purpose of education and profound changes in practice and policy. Yet the first obstacle that most people see when they think about inclusion is a far simpler one: money. There is no money for this "new program"; we all know that. But notice that the implicit assumption is that inclusion is an add-on; that it is a new service for a few students and that if there is no new money, other children and other programs will suffer. We reject this assumption because, in our view, inclusion is not an add-on; it is a norm that permeates all aspects of a school, including the budget.

When inclusion becomes a culture and a philosophy that encompasses every student, all of the resources of the school become available. Inclusion will not save any money, but at the same time, some of the most important resources are not financial. Rearranging the schedule and reassigning staff do much towards providing the necessary conditions and resources for an inclusive school, without requiring extra money. Decisions about resource allocation are not value-neutral, and choosing to make inclusion a reality is not a simple question of finding the "extra" money. It requires careful consideration of the school's goals and options and a willingness to match rhetoric with action.

One of our DSEL schools has taken a stand on its beliefs about learning and children and has built a fully inclusive school. In practice it looks like this:

> In a recent instance, kindergarten and first grade children were asked to design and build towers using a variety of materials. The students worked together to build the towers; students in wheelchairs helped build the towers until the tops were too high to reach and then they actively consulted and collaborated with their taller peers. All students developed, through experience, their own ideas about which moves were "right" and which were "wrong." Teachers, who already had con-

structs for concepts like balance and support, asked questions and talked with the children about their successes and failures. The students were able to refine their own constructs and make sense of the exercise by collaborating with other students and with their teachers. Although older children may understand balance differently from younger children, and some will be better builders than others, this sort of learning is valuable and accessible to almost all children — whether or not they are handicapped, whether or not they speak English, whether or not they are good readers. It is valuable to the teachers as well, who meet afterwards to examine what the children have learned and also to evaluate what the teachers, have learned about the students, the concepts and the learning process.

For this exercise to take place effectively, the school had to support alternative groupings of students across grade and ability levels. It had to support a schedule that allowed children in different grades to work together. And it had to provide teachers with common time to prepare and to debrief. More importantly, the school had to realize that this exercise looked different from others — there is no quiz at the end to show parents — and the community had to understand the purpose and support the approach.

For all this to happen, the school and the community had to work together to define common goals and values. The community is diverse, covering a rural area populated with upper middle class commuters, unemployed and impoverished single mothers, small farmers and store owners, and native American tribal members. Nonetheless, they were able to define learning collaboratively as the active process of individual and group inquiry with each child defining meaning in any subject, whether it be in language arts, math or science. Together they have made hard choices to reallocate resources to promote such learning.

The school has chosen new structures and designs to create settings which allow children to question, experiment, formulate and test theories and then to question again. In this environment, the school uncovers a frequently untapped resource: the students themselves. The process requires that students become resources to themselves and to one another. And because diversity in perspective and experience is an asset not a liability, the schools need not spend time, effort, and money stamping out diversity, sorting, and segregating students into homogeneous groups.

The teachers too have become more of a resource. They are themselves knowledgeable and have formed their own constructs for that which they teach. While facilitating children's questioning and experimentation, they share their constructs with the children. But they have also become resources to one another. By sharing their constructs, observations and experiences with one another and collaboratively reevaluating their own understandings of teaching, learning and content, they model learning as a continual and emergent process.

Finally, the community becomes a resource as well. Members of the community join the educators as they plan curriculum and activities. History, values, and skills of the community all contribute to the choices made for the school. Because the community is part of the decision making process, it is able to support the choices. In one of our DSEL schools, for example, parents determined that, despite staff hesitation, requiring and providing uniforms for the children prevented certain problems; thus, resources for the uniforms were found. For these parents, in this community, the uniforms mattered and the teachers were willing to accept and respect the perspectives and priorities of the parents. Later, when the teachers proposed seating children at tables, not individual desks, to facilitate group work, the community was willing to overcome its hesitation and accept and respect the perspectives and priorities of the teachers. Again, resources were found to buy tables because the community supported the decision.

## A Vision of the Future

To the Regional Laboratory and the schools in our Designing Schools for Enhanced Learning Initiative, inclusion is more than a buzzword. To us, inclusion offers hope for the future. Accepting inclusion is a recognition of reality — that people are different and have varied potentials and that the future will not be like today. Rather than ignore or resist this reality, we choose to see diversity as a resource itself. Inclusion is a way of building a culture in schools that ensures that all children can learn and contribute to the society of the future; it is not a new "program" for "disabled" children. This culture is one that values all children and offers learning settings where children truly feel they belong. This culture recognizes the promise of the individual and her or his potential contribution to an emerging society. This culture is neither easy nor simple to create and maintain. Building an inclusive school is much more complex

and difficult than implementing inclusion as "updated mainstreaming." But inclusion as a culture of belonging can fundamentally transform schooling in America and, in turn, can contribute to the positive development of our world.

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